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ABSTRACT

School boards can improve their schools if they focus on four factors that educational research says most strongly influence school effectiveness. The four factors are (1) the time students spend on the subject matter each day, (2) textbooks, (3) teachers and their teaching methods, and (4) principals' support to help teachers achieve instructional objectives. For each factor, board policies can help improve effectiveness. Concerning the factor of time, for instance, board policies should allot specific amounts of time to basic skills instruction, require daily lesson plans, and discourage classroom interruptions and time not spent on instruction. A board should require textbooks to match its policies on educational philosophy and teaching methods and should make sure textbooks are readable and appropriate to the grade level. For teachers, boards should set specific hiring standards and instructional strategies and should prescribe regular formal evaluations and additional inservice training where improvement is needed. Finally, boards should specify principals' tasks and encourage them to concentrate on teacher evaluation and classroom supervision. (Author/RW)

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UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

A Component of the EDUCATIONAL POLICIES SERVICE

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Focus on these 4 factors to affect what students learn

By Leslie G. Wolfe

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Policy sampler

. . . pacesetting policies from school boards nationwide . . .

"The kids hate it, so I know it's good," a Whippany Park, N.J., school principal said of his board's student suspension policy. The three-year-old policy, described by high school Principal William Dittmar at the recent convention of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, gives students demerits for a variety of offenses. Any student who accumulates 11 demerits spends one day on in-school suspension, but he doesn't spend the day in the principal's office or another disciplinary setting. Instead, he's assigned to one of the many Whippany Park teachers who've volunteered to oversee students suspended in school. What that means is that teacher and student stay glued to one another all day, with the student following the teacher's schedule and participating in the teacher's classes—be they auto mechanics or French.

Students earn two demerits for chronic tardiness or failure to report tardiness to the attendance office; three demerits for misconduct in the halls or being where they're not scheduled to be; three to five demerits for using obscene language; and five demerits for parking on school grounds, behaving badly on school buses, leaving study hall or school without permission, or behaving disrespectfully toward a teacher. Some offenses merit an automatic in-school suspension, such as

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Focus on these 4 factors to affect what students learn

By Leslie G. Wolfe

Time. Texts. Teachers and principals. Over the past 15 years, educational research has pointed time and again to these four elements as having a more significant impact on student learning than any other elements of the school environment. Wherever researchers found different degrees of learning taking place—classroom to classroom, school to school, district to district—they also found critical differences in how much time teachers spent on subjects, what texts they used, how they taught, and how principals helped them achieve instructional objectives. What's more, the findings held true for rural, suburban, and inner city schools, even after taking into account the skills and backgrounds of the students.

One other thing researchers found: School districts developed uniformly effective schools as a result of school boards that recognized the potential impact of these four elements—time, texts, teachers, principals—and, through policy, directed staff district-wide to heed them when managing the instructional program.

People want their school boards to take charge this way. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 68 percent of all people surveyed wanted local boards alone to determine what and how schools teach. State government came in a poor second with 15 percent, and the federal government came in last with 9 percent of the vote. (Eight percent had no opinion.)

State law also requires local boards to direct school resources effectively. In fact, a recent survey of state law found that most states, through either law or state education department regulation, delegate to local boards responsibility for:

- Determining how much time teachers spend on each subject matter area
- Selecting textbooks
- Selecting and evaluating teachers
- Selecting and evaluating principals.

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Leslie G. Wolfe directs the school board inservice program at Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, Portland, Oregon.

A formula for effective schools

What makes some schools effective? At the spring convention of the American Educational Research Association, that question got lots of answers. Summing up findings of his own and others' research, Gilbert Austin, director of the Center for Educational Research and Development at the University of Maryland, told convention-goers that effective schools:

- Have strong leadership from principals.
- Have experienced, well-trained teachers who are satisfied with their jobs and their pay.
- Enroll students who believe hard work, not luck, controls their destinies.
- Involve parents.
- Expect high achievement from students, regardless of their background.
- Allot plenty of time during the school day for learning activities.
- Provide solid inservice training for staff.
- Teach students in small groups, allowing for individual learning styles.
- Teach toward specific objectives. ■

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Quiz: Does your board help students learn?

True or false?

☐ Researchers now know which factors in the school environment most significantly affect student achievement.

☐ Your school board spends most of its time and directs most of its resources toward those factors.

The first statement is true (see feature, page 1). The second? Only you and your board can answer that. To help you find the answer, work through the exercise below. When all members of your board have completed the exercise, compare answers and discuss your results.

1. List 10 factors in the school environment that impinge on student achievement.

2. Rank order the items from one to ten, assigning the lowest number to the item which you believe has the greatest impact on learning.

3. Put a **$** in front of the three items for which your board budgets most of its funds.

4. Put a **T** in front of the three items that regularly take up the most time at your school board meetings.

5. Put a **P** in front of items which parents and students most often talk to you about.

6. Put an **S** in front of the items teachers and other staff members most often bring to your attention.

7. Put a **5** in front of any items which you think your board will not have control of in five years.

8. Put an **M** in front of items covered in the board's policy manual.

9. Put an **R** in front of items covered by administrative regulations.

10. Go down your list and place near each item the date when your board last discussed this item. ■

Effective school policies

From page 1

There they are, the same four factors in school effectiveness. With the law, public opinion, and research solidly behind school boards, what board would not want to double-check its policies to ensure that they lead the way toward more effective schools? Below, we look in greater depth at each of the four factors and identify specific policy provisions boards might consider.

More time, more learning

The single most important research finding is that time is directly related to learning. The probability that a student will learn a given skill increases with the amount of time the student spends in a preplanned lesson working on that skill.

There are several policy topics keyed to this finding:

• *Instructional program.* If the board wants all students to learn basic writing skills, or math or reading skills, does the board have a basic instructional program policy that allots specific amounts of the school day to writing, reading, or math lessons?

• *Lesson plans.* Do teachers plan each day's lesson? They may or may not draft lesson plans that have clear instructional objectives—unless board policy requires this account of lesson time.

• *Teacher workload, classroom interruptions.* In some districts, written policies tell teachers to spend classroom time on planned lessons, but what actually happens is this: Too frequently, lesson time is interrupted for assemblies, announcements, lunch counts, handling tardy students. and so on. Does board policy keep the teacher's time centered on teaching? Does it discourage frequent interruptions in lesson times?

The text as teacher

In most classrooms, the textbook *is* the curriculum. That is, researchers found that teachers use the text for about 90 percent of what they do. At the elementary school level, the textbook more often than not is the only source consulted by teachers and read by students during the entire school year.

This is not necessarily bad. A well-organized, philosophically acceptable textbook with accurate content is an important classroom tool. However, the terrific impact of textbooks on lessons raises three issues that boards must resolve in their written policy on textbook selection.

• *Educational philosophy.* The first issue a board must confront is that every textbook reflects certain beliefs and values. These may be purposefully introduced or merely the unintentional reflection of a writer's own views. The board must ascertain, as it selects among texts, which beliefs are contained in which books. Does what the text says about

UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES is provided automatically each month to every board member and to the central offices of school districts subscribing to the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association's School District Management Services Department. Subscribers may request sample policies referred to in articles from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse at NSBA offices, 1055 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

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citizenship, women, and minorities, for instance, mesh with the board's established educational philosophy and instructional goals policies?

• *Instructional approach.* The second issue is that every textbook says something about not only what students should learn, but also about how they can best learn it. Every textbook—because of how it's organized and the learning activities it proposes—reflects someone's notions about whether kids learn better in traditional or open classrooms, with individually prescribed lessons or group lesson plans, when threatened or encouraged, or cajoled. Does the board's textbook selection policy list among its criteria that the books the board will consider should reflect the board's established policy provisions on teaching methods and instructional arrangements?

• *Other measures of appropriateness.* Finally, all textbooks are more or less readable, more or less appropriate to each grade level, and so on. The board's policy also should include these other measures of appropriateness for selected textbooks.

Teachers with objectives

The best teachers are those who are best prepared, and most flexible in adapting prepared plans. So common sense might dictate, and so research has proven. Although researchers have not agreed on all characteristics common to good teachers, they consistently have found that the teachers who define and teach toward an objective are those most effective in getting kids to master the object of instruction. They are also those who diagnose, monitor, and adjust their lessons as the class proceeds, accommodating material and approach to students' various styles and levels of learning.

The policy-minded school board is more likely to hire good teachers and to offer training for teachers needing help. Lemons already on staff should be squeezed out, also according to policy. Here are policies to consider:

• *Hiring standards.* Boards that want to hire the best possible teaching staff say so in their policy collection. They approve job descriptions that set out the specific qualities and training that they demand of teaching staff.

• *Instructional policies.* Boards that want good teachers don't make teachers guess what is expected of them. From planned lessons to approved teacher methods to specific instructional objectives, the effective school board will map out its instructional strategy in its policy manual.

• *Evaluation.* Are teachers doing what's expected? A teacher's supervisor should know for sure. Formal and regular evaluations based on specific performance expectations should be required by board policy.

• *Inservice, or out of service.* If evaluation results show improvement is needed, the board might offer training. If improvement is needed but doesn't result, despite training the board might offer, firing is the board's best recourse. Both options, again, are reflected in policy.

The principal resource

Teachers set their own priorities according to perceived notions about their principal's priorities. In other words, as a decade-long study of 140 schools recently showed, teachers tend to do what principals expect them to do. If expectations are high, teachers perform well and school is effective. If little is expected or expectations are unclear, there's a commensurate loss in teacher effectiveness.

Good principals, research says,

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SHORTS FROM THE COURTS

Voluntary prayer policy overturned

A Lubbock, Texas, school policy permitting voluntary student prayer has been overturned by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The policy allowed students in three Lubbock high schools to meet for prayer sessions in school facilities before and after the official school day. In keeping with other school prayer cases recently decided in federal appeals courts, the 5th Circuit Court found the policy in violation of the First Amendment's prohibition against government establishment of religion. Attorneys for the case, *Lubbock Civil Liberties Union vs. Lubbock Independent School District*, will not appeal, since the U.S. Supreme Court last year refused to review another appellate court ruling banning school prayer in Louisiana. (EPS file reference: SCHOOL CEREMONIES AND OBSERVANCES, code IND)

No diploma for unable handicapped

If a school board requires all students to pass competency tests in order to graduate, it may withhold diplomas from handicapped students who don't pass, a federal district court judge has ruled. The decision favored Peoria, Illinois, School District #150, which in 1980 denied 11 students diplomas because of their failure to pass competency tests. In arguing for the students in *Deborah Brookhart vs. Illinois State Board of Education*, Attorney Gary Kerr said that the 18-month phase-in period for the tests did not give his clients adequate preparation time. He asked for some modifications of the test, including having the tests read to students who couldn't read. The school district argued that such modifications would make the test, a measure of reading ability, meaningless. The judge agreed, a decision that may be appealed since a similar case in New York last year resulted in a ruling in favor of handicapped students who had failed that state's competency exam.

Meanwhile, Illinois legislators have passed a law forbidding schools to deny diplomas if handicapped students fail basic skills exams, but the judge in *Deborah Brookhart* didn't let that affect his decision. "This presumably does not mean that a person who knows nothing, due to a total inability to learn, must receive a high school diploma," he said. (EPS file reference: GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS, code IKF) ■

Effective school policies

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know what makes teachers good, communicate that knowledge to teachers, and let teachers know they'll be pushed out if they aren't committed to success. They also spend a large percent of their time helping teachers be more effective, and are willing to accept unpleasant confrontations in the process. This help mostly takes the form of teacher observation as there appears to be a direct relationship between the time used for classroom supervision and teacher effectiveness. The confrontations usually result when principals observe and indicate to teachers the need to correct poor instruction.

Says L. E. Scarr, superintendent of Lake Washington (Wash.) Schools: "Since my board assigned 30 percent of the principal's time to teacher evaluation two years ago, we have made steady improvement in student learning and attitudes. Our state test scores have increased by 20 percent, vandalism has gone down, and we have passed three major tax levies."

That's some testimonial. How can other school boards translate these findings about principals into policy form, and then into practice? Check these policy topics:

• *Personnel policies.* Just as principals must know what they want of teachers before teachers will produce top results, boards must know what they expect of principals. A job description, drafted by the administration and approved by the board, should spell out the qualifications and tasks the board demands. Hiring policies should require that candidates embody all that the job description asks. Policy should also reflect the board's belief that principals, as teachers, need regular evaluation and the opportunity for inservice training.

• *Building level administration.* Does the board, through a policy on line and staff relations, encourage principals to communicate high standards to teachers? Does the board's policy on instructional planning and evaluation involve principals, since they must carry out the policy?

School boards lead

Every school board can have a very direct effect on whether kids learn—if the board gives official recognition to the four factors that most significantly affect learning: time, textbooks, teacher effectiveness, and principal leadership. Official recognition will most importantly take the form of developing policy; however, a soon-to-be-published research report on school improvement in California reveals that schooling improved when boards spent board meeting time receiving regular reports about policy implementation.

After the Woodburn (Ore.) Public Schools got its critical policies in shape, Board Member T. Gunderson said, "It's the first time I felt I was having a real effect on student learning." ■

Policy Sampler

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fighting, stealing, threatening teachers or students, or possessing a weapon. Automatic five-day out-of-school suspensions are reserved for students who come to school in possession of or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. (EPS file reference: STUDENT SUSPENSION, code JGD)

A new policy in Massena, N.Y., offers average and below-average students one last chance at higher education—if they've got the ambition to succeed academically. The policy idea was suggested four years ago by Superintendent Richard Morrow, who wanted to donate his speaking fees and honoraria to a fund for students who aren't at the top of their class but who, nonetheless, "are determined to further their education," says Morrow. Now everyone contributes to the fund, which the district calls the Administrators Scholarship Fund. They've collected $2,800 so far this year. (EPS file reference: STUDENT AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS, code JI) ■

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